

LOCAL

## Pardon Project of York County event focuses on 2nd chances for those with criminal records



**Lena Tzivekis**

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Last week, the Pardon Project of York County and its community partners presented a screening of the documentary "Pardon Me," followed by a panel discussion.

Over 200 were at the Capitol Theatre in downtown York on Oct. 4, where "Pardon Me" director and producer Shuja Moore, a pardon recipient himself, shined a spotlight on the transformative potential of pardons.

The 30-minute film focuses on individuals who got a fresh start via the pardon process.

The panel discussion that followed the screening, moderated by York County District Attorney David Sunday, highlighted the stories of panelists Shuja Moore, Judge William R. Carpenter from the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas, pardon recipients C. Reginald "Reggie" Johnson Esq. and David Bryant, and pardon fellows DaShawn Harrison and Laurie Besden.

Filmmaker Shuja Moore spoke about his arrest at the age of 22 after he was convicted of an accidental homicide following a scuffle over the possession of a firearm.

After serving 12 years in prison, he was released and built a career working for nonprofits in the Philadelphia area. Through filmmaking and his nonprofit organization Do Moore Good, he said he is aiming to promote the narrative of justice in the media.

York County native David Bryant spoke about his struggles with substance use, which began in his late teens after his mother committed suicide. He has been in recovery for 22 years after battling alcohol and prescription drug addiction and received a pardon from Gov. Tom Wolf in April 2022.

Laurie Besden spoke about her experience with substance use. She was arrested five times, caused 29 car accidents and was sentenced to prison three separate times. Besden was sent to rehabilitation and was sentenced to the "option of a new life" by Carpenter.

The attorney turned her life around and received her full pardon by Gov. Tom Wolf in August 2020.

"I wasn't seeking a pardon to erase my history," Besden said, adding that she wanted to use her life experience to pay it forward and help others. "I am now the best version of myself," she said.

York native Dashawn Harrison served nine and a half years in state prison.

Since his release, he has been a youth mentor, volunteering in local organizations, including the YMCA, Pa Lady Rens, 717 Hoop Dreams and more. He spoke about his newfound purpose of serving the community, and is a pardon fellow, aiming to help pardon recipients tell their stories.

## **Mission: change lives**

C. Reginald Johnson spoke about his arrest and conviction for armed robbery and kidnapping and was originally sentenced to 10-year concurrent sentences for each offense. His sentence was completed in 1976. Since then, Johnson has become a trial attorney focusing on areas such as criminal defense and personal injury.

In 1983, Johnson received a pardon from the governor of Massachusetts.

"My mission in life is to try and change people's lives, and my clients' lives, through counseling them and giving them a second chance at life," he said.

The documentary also featured compelling narratives of two people navigating the challenging pardon process in Pennsylvania, illustrating the profound impact it can have on their lives.

Following the panel discussion, several members of the audience who were actually interested in obtaining pardons asked the panelists about the steps they had taken to obtain one.

Viewers also commented on how much they appreciated the movie and how it affected them. Some were moved to tears.

Victoria Connor, CEO of the York County Bar Association/York County Bar Foundation, emphasized that this issue is a community problem, affecting housing, voting rights and employment opportunities.

A pardon in Pennsylvania is the only way to erase felony and misdemeanor convictions from a criminal record.

## **Learn more and watch the panel discussion**

For more information on pardons, visit the York County Pardon Project website.

The York Daily Record live streamed the panel discussion on its Facebook page and the video can be viewed there.